DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 213 140 EA 014 443

AUTHOR	Hughes. P. W.; And Others
TITLE	Accounting for Our Schools: Problems and Possibilities.
INSTITUTION	Deakin Univ., Victoria, (Australia). School of Education.
PUB DATE	Jun 81
NOTE	6p.; Funded by Deakin University Foundation.
AVAILABLE FROM	Editor, The Australian Administrator, School of Education, Deakin University, Victoria 3217, AUSTRALIA ($.85).
JOURNAL CIT	The Australian Administrator; v2 n3 Jun 1981
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Accountability; Behavioral Objectives; Course Objectives; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Evaluation; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Program Evaluation; Public Opinion; Resource Materials; Teacher Responsibility; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS	Australia; School Based Management

ABSTRACT

Accountability, in the sense of educational efficiency, has popular political appeal in Australia. Yet there is urgent need for Australian educators to influence how accountability is to be defined and to determine how it is to be implemented at the school level. One useful definition of accountability, satisfactory to both teachers and the public, is school-initiated curriculum evaluation. Under this system, teachers must explain the justification for each course proposed, what the course will involve, and what evidence of learning will be apparent. This process provides a clear base from which the teacher or others evaluate the program or process. It allows the planning of educational outcomes to remain a school-level activity. It also provides teachers with a constructive method for describing their purposes, offers the community a ready and useful source of information, and ensures that evaluation is undertaken in a systematic manner. The encouragement of teacher participation in evaluation activities and the development of support materials and networks has been a major concern of the Teachers as Evaluators Project, as has been evidenced by the project's production of evaluation planning guidelines, development of inservice training materials, and publication of teachers' accounts of their evaluation activities. (Author/JM)

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THE AUSTRALIAN ADMINISTRATOR

A Professional Publication for Educational Administrators

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Published bi-monthly, February to December

EDITOR: Dr. W. J. Smyth

ED213140

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ISSN 0158-7447

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Vol. 2, No. 3. **JUNE 1981**

The question of how to ensure accountability for what transpires in schools, which at the same time acknowledging the professional integrity and work of teachers, is one of the real paradoxes confronting school administrators. The authors discuss some of the issues surrounding the accountability movement in Australia, and one attempt that has been made to grapple with the problem sensibly. (Ed.)

ACCOUNTING FOR OUR SCHOOLS: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

P.W. Hughes, N.A. Russell, D. McConachy

INTRODUCTION

It has been a long-standing tradition in Australian education that 'governments provide, professionals decide, and parents and students accept' (Schools Commission, 1979, p.120). This tradition has been challenged in the past decade by the devolution of decision-making powers from state to regional and school levels and, more recently, by moves to make teachers and schools accountable.

It is the contention of this paper that schools and teachers have always been accountable, and that the current accountability movement reflects a concern by some parents and employers about recent changes in society. These changes include rising youth unemployment and new education approaches such as school-based curriculum development and open education. The demand by the public at large for increased emphasis on accountability from schools is not an uncommon one, but the rhetoric is new.

The term 'accountability' has been traditionally associated with business management and theories of production. If current demands for cost effectiveness and simple accounting criteria that can be applied to schools are implemented, there is a danger that the emphasis in schools on quality of achievement and on depth of thought will be distorted.

The Newcastle Commission in 1861, represented an early attempt to use evaluation as a cost effective procedure. The Commission had been set up in order to raise the standards of achievement in the basic subjects. It reached the following conclusion:

> There is only one way of achieving this result, which is to institute a searching examination by competent authorities of every child in every school to which grants are to be paid, with the view of ascertaining whether these indispensable elements of knowledge are thoroughly acquired, and to make the prospects and position of the teacher dependent, to a considerable extent, on the results of this examination (p. xxi).

The report of this Commission led to the institution in England of the 'payment by results' system, which was to last forty years in formal terms but whose effects are still visible. The examinations in the schools were conducted by inspectors, who tested in a very limited area of computation together with one problem. The grants were paid on the basis of the number of pupils attaining a pass mark. The results were disastrous; the already limited teaching became more confined still, concentrating on the rote learning of simple number facts and ignoring any applications. There was no encouragement for higher achievement, and thus the main effort was spent on the weaker children, forgetting about the average and more able pupils. The effects were thus quite the reverse of the intentions, contributing to very limited achievement coupled with a lasting distaste for the subject. It contributed also towards a lasting heritage of mistrust between teachers and inspectors.

Unfortunately, accountability in terms of educational efficiency has popular political appeal and there is an urgent need for Australian educators to influence actively how those in power define accountability and orchestrate action at the school level.

This paper takes the view that to meet this need,

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Annual subscription $5.00, single copies 85c. Registered for posting as a publication, Category B. Editorial and subscription enquiries to Editor, The Australian Administrator, School of Education Deakin University, Victoria, 3217.

EA 014 443

accountability can be usefully linked to the notion of school-initiated curriculum evaluation. An attempt is made to develop an approach which combines the two and satisfies the requirements of both teachers and the general public. A possible role for the Teachers as Evaluators Project (Hughes, Russell & McConachy, 1979) is briefly outlined.

NEW DECADE: NEW ISSUE

Historically, the curriculum has been equated with a formal course of study handed down by state authorities and distributed in the form of a prescribed syllabus (Walker, 1979). Control of these syallabuses was exercised in a series of external examinations and often reinforced by State Education Department School Inspectors. The school was accountable to the Education Department and the public insofar as it taught the prescribed syllabus and succeeded in getting students through the examinations and into higher education or employment.

In the past two decades however, there has been considerable change in education, in part due to changes in society and a need to enable schools to be more effective in this society. As a result, a much broader notion of curriculum has emerged to include 'all learning which is devised and guided by the school, wherever and however it may occur' (Hughes, 1973, p.3).

Coupled with this notion of curriculum is the concept of school-based curriculum development, employing that the four fundamental aspects to be considered in curriculum development: aims and objectives, content, organisation, and evaluation, can be implemented at the school level while still within existing education systems.

Davis (1979) sugests that, in fact, this rarely occurs because there are two fundamentally different interpretations of school-based curriculum development: one which amounts to administrative reform of curriculum development processes, and the other which is more like a political-ideological revolution in schooling itself. The first is not school-based curriculum development in the true sense of the word, and the second can only ever occur in isolated instances because the structures and underlying philosophy of Australian education systems do not present a favourable environment for such development (McConachy, 1979). While this distinction may be too absolute, it is clear that school-based development faces significant difficulties.

Despite these limitations, the move towards school-based curriculum development has resulted in a number of significant changes, including the nature of school accountability. Alternative patterns for the assessment of students are being developed in all states and territories and in a number of situations formal system-wide external examinations no longer exist. A consequence of this development is increased teacher opportunity to participate in the design, selection and evaluation of curricula and in the assessment of students.

These development are not always accepted or understood by parents and employers who have confidence in the system they were part of some twenty years ago. Thus, despite the development of initiatives for school level evaluation, in the present educational context, teachers and schools appear less accountable to the general public than they were previously.

In fact, however, that feeling is illusory from two points of view. External examinations do not and cannot provide useful information which is relevant to the individual schools for which they operate. Secondly, the assessments provided by teachers in individual schools can give accurate and searching insight into the weaknesses and strengths both of students and of their learning opportunities.

The external examination in Australia and New Zealand has not provided accountability information that has been useful for both teachers and the community at large. In fact, the external examination system has a very chequered history in this regard. Elley and Livingston (1972) report that in New Zealand there was a dramatic movement away from external examinations in the 1930's. However, in 1953 after seven years of accrediation of schools there was marked dissatisfaction and a desire to return to examinations. In the 1970's there was again strong pressure to abolish public examinations. Obviously external examinations did not achieve what was hoped in New Zealand. In Australia there is considerable pressure to abolish public examinations. The major reasons given for this involve dissatisfaction with the effects of the exam system on the school curriculum, both for those students not wishing to enter a tertiary institution, and for those who do - a desire by teachers for more autonomy, and the opportunity to provide the most relevant work for their students.

Dunn and Radford (1974) argue that public examinations cannot validly play multiple roles such as selecting, certifying and guiding students and that the public examination system will continue to promote conflict between the goals of assisting individuals' development and providing a social sorting process. For these reasons, public examinations are not likely to provide accountability information useful to both teachers and society.

ONE VIEW OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The thrust for school accountability is very much in evidence, as indicated by the following anecdote:

> I am utterly fed up with having to conduct spelling lessons at the kitchen table every night because spelling errors in any school work are rarely corrected unless the work is actually a spelling test. I am fed up, too, with a system in which elective subjects, originally designed to broaden a student's horizons, have the edge in emphasis over the traditional 3R's (Bone, 1976).

The clear implication is that teachers and schools are not emphasising skill areas. This belief is not limited to the popular press as evidenced by the following excerpt:

> It is now well recognized that a proportion of young people, perhaps up to one-quarter, are ill-served by the operation of our school system in the present social context. . . It is essential that schools accept the responsibility, at least until the completion of compulsory schooling, for ensuring that students have cognitive skills (literacy, numeracy, and oracy) and effective skills ('life role competencies') to acceptable standards. . .Good teachers are expected to pay attention to and deal with individual differences among students, but their expectations of certain classes of students are low. Teachers must learn to have high expectations of all their students,

> however difficult that may seem (Karmel, 1979, p.15).

There appears to be a prevailing idea that schools and teachers are not presently succeeding in their tasks, and that many of society's ills may be attributed to this. This feeling is captured by House (1974):

> Increasing educational costs and mounting frustration with social and political problems have brought higher demands for answers to an important question: What are we getting for our educational dollar (p.259).

Present demands for educational accountability may have stemmed from this base, and as such have far-reaching implications for education. If it is accepted that the important issue in education is cost effectiveness, then the school may find it has a role to maximise the attainment level of specific skills similar to those required by the Newcastle Commission in 1861.

Viewed in these terms, education becomes an input-output-process, manifested by a tendency to concentrate on levels of performance, including minimum competencies. In the U.S.A. a number of states have accountability systems based on management controls such as Management by Objectives, Plan-Program-Budget-Systems and Critical Path Method, and over forty states have accountability legislation. A major problem with some of the accountability legislation is that, in order to define clearly the required levels of achievement, they have emphasised minimum levels and severely limited skills.

While many Australians would find these U.S.A. accountability systems abhorrent, recent statements such as the following by the Prime Minister, suggest that there is a move in this direction, to create a closer tie between education and the economy:

> Because Australia has an advanced industrial economy. . .there is a need for a substantial share of the nation's resources to be devoted to education. . .(and) and it vital that resources devoted to education should be used to maximum effect, that unnecessary duplication should be avoided (Cited in Bone, 1976, p.6).

This move is also reflected in the Government's move to have acceptable aims set so that progress toward them can be measured (Education, Training and Employment, 1979). Already the role of the Australian Council for Educational Research in this exercise has been outlined. This body will:

> (i) specify a range of performance levels in basic skills for particular groups;
>
> (ii) specify a range of performance levels to be expected of pupils of varying abilities at particular age levels so that the horizon is not confined to the minimum;
>
> (iii) develop appropriate testing devices to enable schools - and occasionally the nation - to check achievement without imposing a straight-jacket on schools (Education News, 1979, p.34).

These statements appear to be coming close to the specification of performance objectives, a situation which may become a reality if the following words are any indication:

> The Government ought to be a guarantor of, and have specific objectives for, the education of all Australian school students (Tannock, 1979, p.2).

This would be an unnessarily restrictive situation and there is an urgent need for educators to provide an alternative concept of accountability which is acceptable both to their colleagues and to the general public.

'Curriculum evaluation' is a term which has received wide publicity in recent years. Closely linked to the notion of 'teacher as evaluator', it may be described as:

> the process of delineating, obtaining, and providing information useful for making decisions and judgements about educational programs and curricula (C.D.C., 1977, p.24).

To date it has centred on the notion of evaluation for curriculum improvement, been viewed as an integral part of school-based curriculum development, and has been deliberately kept apart from the notion of accountability.

However, there have been problems in the implementation of school-based evaluation initiatives. This is in part attributable to the lack of adequate resources (material, personnel and financial) available to help teachers develop systematic evaluation procedures, and to the fact that evaluation has traditionally been in the hands of such specialists as the inspector and the examination board. Thus, despite considerable effort spent in developing support structures, evaluation still represents the unknown to many teachers and is often perceived as a threatening activity.

Viewed from this perspective, school-initiated curriculum evaluation undertaken in isolation does not present a viable alternative to the political-economic model of accountability. Furthermore, by its very nature it emphasises self-reflection, and makes no allowance for a more public display of teacher accountability. Thus, many teachers remain unconvinced of the value of time spent in evaluating curricula when external pressures for accountability are demanding a more public statement of educational progress.

A number of educators (Fensham, 1980; MacDonald, 1978, Elliott, 1978) have, however, linked school-initiated evaluation to the notion of accountability by viewing the latter in terms of teacher responsibility to give an account of what is proposed in a particular program or process. By a proper account:

> is meant one that usefully communicates to a particular audience why the course is proposed, what studying it will involve, and what evidence of learning will be available to the learners and other interested persons (Fensham, 1980, p.2).

The purpose of the account is two-fold: it confirms what the teacher sees as his/her responsibilities and aims, reducing possible blame for things which came about as a result of the circumstances, and provides a clear base from which the teacher or anyone else may undertake an evaluation of the program or process.

This approach appears to offer a number of advantages: it ensures that the planning of educational outcomes remains essentially a school-level activity, suited to the needs of particular districts and individual students; it provides teachers with a constructive method of describing their purposes; it provides the

community with a ready and useful source of information and the opportunity to make inputs into the educational process, and it ensures that evaluation is undertaken in a systematic manner because it now has a clearly stated focus.

Obviously there is much work to be done if this is to be seen as a viable approach to accountability: strategies must be devised for the preparation and presentation of accounts; structures must be developed for the dissemination of information contained in accounts and for the creation of conditions to respond to them, and support systems must be established to help teacher-evaluators.

CONCLUSION AND A ROLE FOR TEACHERS AS EVALUATORS

The encouragement of teacher participation in evaluation activities and the development of support materials and networks has been a major concern of the Teachers as Evaluators Project since its inception in 1977. This has been evidenced by:

- the production of evaluation planning guidelines for trialling with practising teachers;
- the development of in-service training materials, for example, guidelines, tape/slides sequences, videotapes, discussion papers.
- the publication of bibliographies listing evaluation references and giving details of evaluations carried out at the school level;
- the conduct of training workshops held in conjunction with state, territorial and Catholic education departments;
- the publication of teachers' accounts of their evaluation activities, generally in the form of case studies and as a resource for other teachers.

This growing collection of resources serves to highlight the fact that with access to appropriate materials and experiences resource people (often other teachers) the individual teacher will be able to provide an account of his/her work in the school.

The need for practical examples of 'account-writing' and subsequent evaluations is already being evidenced (Lovegrove, 1979; Educ. Dept. Tasmania, 1979; N.T. Dept. Educ; 1979). The Teachers as Evaluators Project can usefully expand its activities to link school-initiated evaluation with the notion of the giving of an educational account. This might be achieved by working with teachers and other educators to devise strategies for the preparation and presentation of accounts, and by expanding the existing network of teacher-evaluators to further encourage the sharing of ideas and experiences.

The promotion of the dual notion of accounting and evaluation offers great potential for the improvement of teaching and learning and obviates the need for a notion of 'economic' accountability.

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Printed at Deakin University printery.